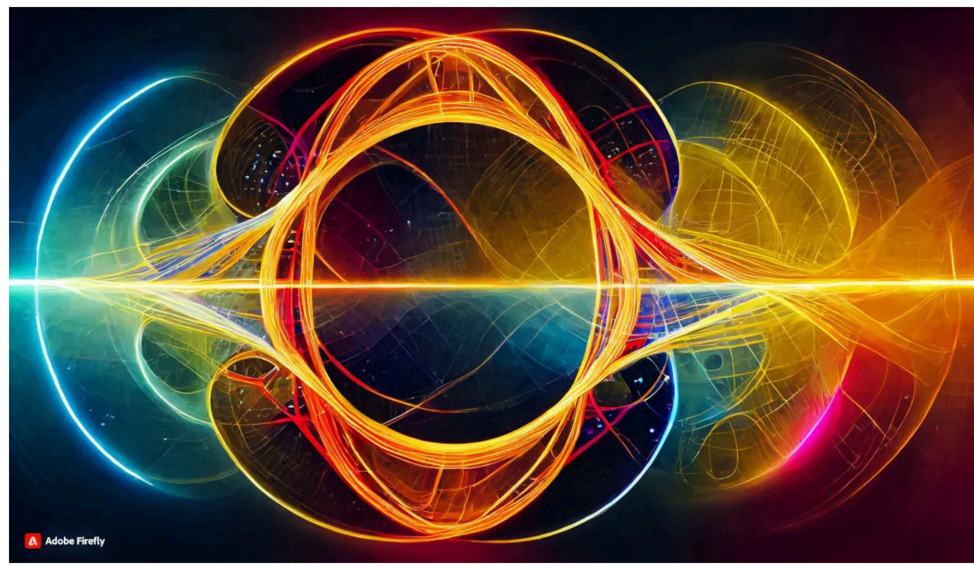
International Council for Media Literacy

Bridging Academia to Action

Pedagogies for Critical Media Production and Disinformation Studies: A Taxonomy of Co-Literacies

November 28, 2023 by Alaa Al-Musalli, Ki Wight



Abstract

This article presents a taxonomy for critical communication praxis in two pedagogical contexts, namely, Critical Media Production Literacy (CMPL) and Disinformation Literacy (DL), which are the foci of two courses that we teach. The rationale behind developing this taxonomy is to find the connections between the list of macro and micro literacies that we

planned to develop in our courses to strengthen our deliverables and outcomes. The taxonomy was presented in a workshop at the Global Media Education Summit (GMES, 2023) to elicit the attendees' views on how the macro and micro competencies (skills and subskills) in critical media production and disinformation literacy connect with other co-literacies. The taxonomy includes a list of literacies that we used to plan our courses, namely, Media Literacy (ML), Media Information Literacy (MIL), New Media Literacy (NML), and Critical Information Literacy (CIL). The attendees were given a set of questions and invited to share insights on how they see the literacies connecting and whether they can be independently shaped through separate taxonomies to help course designers improve their course content.

Keywords

Critical Media Production Literacy, Disinformation Literacy, Co-literacies, Literacies Taxonomy

Introduction

We are lost in the literacies! There are many, maybe too many. While most new courses abide by themes and competencies based on textbook chapters, developers of new courses of a practical nature might find it difficult to depend on one or more textbooks. What ends up emerging in such courses is a list of themes for a 14 or 15-week term based on the course designers' or professors' interests, expertise, or publications. Whether this is ideal or not is not the question here. The question is: what can we do when we can't find a textbook we can rely on for a brand new course that aims to do something new; where do we start?

As we developed our two CMPL and DL courses, we found that the list of macro and micro literacies that we wanted to train are scattered across many other ML-related literacies. We ended up developing our courses based on what we know about our students, the outcomes we wanted to teach, and the material. Despite the success we had with the two courses, we needed to revisit the competencies we chose and check the compatibility of the skills we developed against other related courses and literacies. To do that, we set out to find the sub-literacies under each literacy and placed the two courses alongside them to get a good sense of how to improve our courses and/or any issues we may not have noticed. We also wanted to see if the two courses could be taught alongside as co-requisites or prerequisites. Before we present our taxonomy, below is more on the taxonomy design rationale as well as the challenges that we faced when planning our courses.

Why plan macro and micro literacies, and how do ML, MIL, NML, and CIL differ from CMPL and DL?

Inspired by the diagnostic approach to developing language literacy skills, such as listening and reading, we present the literacies in our taxonomy in terms of skills to help show how many each literacy could carry, the interconnections of the skills under each literacy, and what their sub skills could be. Micro skills (or sub skills) are lower, deeper-level skills underneath the macro skill; they are hierarchically ordered from broad to more specific (Field, 1998; Irvine-Niakaris, 1997; Munby, 1978; Rost, 1990; Al-Musalli, 2015).

The literature provides many definitions and classifications of literacy skills and the type recommended by age group and field of study. In addition to CL, which is “an evolving, multi-dimensional process of layered reading comprehension, contextual analysis, and honest reflection”, Wilson (2021) lists “software literacy, quantitative literacy, historical literacy, civic literacy, media literacy, academic literacy, and rhetorical literacy” (p. 182). Each of these literacies carries a specific purpose and relevant skill sets. Therefore, to understand where CMPL and DL are situated among other literacies and how they connect with other literacies, we initially needed to consider the literacies we listed in the taxonomy as mutually exclusive to help map them out under different columns in the table. This helped us see where they interlink or differ and not treat one literacy as a sub-literacy of another. We will consider below the history, connection and interrelation between ML, MIL, CIL, and NML skills in comparison to CMPL and DL.

With the development and proliferation of digital media content and technologies over the past century, critical media literacy (CML) emerged as an educational field to enable educational and public reckoning with the impacts of media content on notions of self and society (Kellner & Share, 2007). As CML theories developed, emphasis was placed on the production of media messages: not just the acts of reading messages as an overly political and social part of the production process (Kellner & Share, 2005), but on actively producing counter-narratives as a means of asserting

differing positionalities and materialities within the media landscape (Cordes and Sabzalian (2020), Hooks (2014), Nam (2010), and Patterson et al. (2016). These developments in CML led to the emergence of production-focused CMPL (Nam, 2010, Wight, 2020).

As for DL, it has been mostly developed as a sub-literacy or theme in secondary and undergraduate level literacy programs, mostly within ML or MIL courses. DL coincides with emerging awareness and theories developed to contend with the scope and potentialities of disinformation within our media-saturated societies. One could argue that DL skills are higher-level competencies than those developed in ML or MIL programs as they include journalistic and fact-finding skills, which elevate the kind of competencies developed to a skill set closer to those in Critical Information Literacy (CIL) or New Media Literacy (NML), bearing a more serious political, social, and economic responsibility to fight and stop the dissemination of disinformation. Given the epidemic nature of disinformation in media content and cultures, it is important to question the position of DL within and in relation to other ML or MIL curricula.

The emphasis on ML in most discussions brings to the surface one important question: does ML encompass all media-related literacies? Aufderheide's (1993) Aspen Institute's Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy defines ML as: "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes". More recently, the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) build their definition of ML on more traditional literacies, such as writing and reading, and add the critical words "evaluate, create, and act" to its definition, making ML "the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE, CREATE, and ACT" through all means of communication (NAMLE, n.d.). This definition stresses the importance of ML's function to empower people to be "critical thinkers and makers, effective communicators and active citizens" (Christ, 2020, p. 155). We can argue that the above skills seem to have been largely built on the principles

of Bloom et al.'s (1956) Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain which listed six levels of cognitive skills, namely, Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Iowa State University Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (n.d.) gives the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy, one which Anderson et al. (2001) created to reflect the changes in learning patterns since Bloom's Taxonomy was first published. The new taxonomy offers "more outcome-focused modern education objectives" and uses active verbs rather than nouns as labels for the different knowledge levels. Another significant change is the introduction of 'Create' as the highest level, making the revised list of levels: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate and Create. This new list shares "Analyze, Evaluate and Create" with NAMLE's above-mentioned ML skills, but "Understand and Apply" from the revised Bloom Taxonomy can be deemed as sub-skills of "Analyze and Act" from the NAMLE list, respectively.

Scholars, educators, and practitioners see the connection between ML and DL differently; some consider the two synonymous; for example, Popescu (2020) states that ML is lacking in many societies due to educational praxis models and/or state control of curricula, and lack of awareness of the methods used for the production of disinformation is not helping people cross check the information they consume. Therefore, ML and media awareness skills are needed to develop an understanding of how disinformation is generated, how to differentiate between fake and real news, and how to fight disinformation (pp. 104-105). Other scholars, like Mary Kate Lonergan, an eighth-grade social studies teacher at Eagle Hill Middle School in Manlius, NY, who calls for an updating of the definition of literacy, stresses the importance of ML's benefits to empower young students to question media biases as well as their own personal biases. Cyndy Scheibe, executive director of Project Look Sharp, a media literacy organization based at Ithaca College, NY, which has been developing ML lessons and resources for over 20 years, emphasize the need to see ML as a pedagogy rather than a content area and to start ML early and at every grade level to help develop

critical thinking skills (Kletter, 2020, pp. 39-40). The latter two views concentrate on early education and consider ML a macro-literacy under which DL is promoted. In this regard, we could argue that in early levels of education, ML programs can successfully serve the purpose of developing initial DL skills. However, this could imply the need to consider DL as a separate pedagogy, especially for advanced levels such as high school and undergraduate levels, one that is not connected to a content area and is more related to activities relating to active citizenship, democracy, and promotion of ethics in civil society.

Considering the connection between MIL and CIL, the UNESCO suggests that MIL is the answer to disinformation. The UNESCO (n.d.) maintains that MIL helps users learn how to wisely contribute to online and offline discussions through developing an ability to authenticate information and to properly engage with media to “promote equality, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, peace, freedom of expression, and access to information”. MIL education is evolving with the expansion of media and information platforms. It is no longer restricted to the ability to read, analyze visual communication, speak, and write as was emphasized by early research such as (Ruben, 1997). Therefore, MIL is “an imperative” to tackle the effects of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022, pp. 6-7). Brisola and Doyle (2019) highlight the importance of MIL, reporting the UNESCO’s (n.d.) recognition of the main role of information and freedom of expression in our daily lives and the work of MIL education which empowers users with the skills to understand the functions of information providers and media to critically evaluate content to make informed decisions about what they consume and produce, which helps mitigate some of the damages of disinformation. Nevertheless, they argue that CIL is more of a political stance than a concept; therefore, it cannot be an exact synonym of MIL. CIL teachers, researchers or practitioners do more than core MIL training, they “arise consciousness, stimulate emancipation

and fight naturalized injustices"; they focus on the students' interests and personal experiences to engage them with what matters to them and showcase different information contexts (pp. 283-284).

Theoretically speaking, DL is closer to CIL pedagogy than any other. Brisola and Doyle (2019) believe it is a necessary investment to create critical citizens who seek and manage complex facts to identify biases in what they consume and resist disinformation. Considering that socially constructed information includes political, economic, and cultural conditions, the critical engagement with information that CIL fosters allows people to "cooperate in the collective construction of knowledge" and fight injustice when applicable. They state that, "If the purpose of disinformation is to drown people in news, critical information literacy is to help them survive the informational tsunami" (p. 284).

As for NML competencies, Hameleers (2022) cites Kahne et al. (2012) emphasizing the importance of NML for young citizens to help them assess the quality and truthfulness of the information they consume online as NML creates literate consumers who understand the process of producing political information, how it is consumed, and how information is interpreted based on personal biases and beliefs. NML approaches can help to stimulate more critical skills by warning consumers about the negative impact of deceptive information (Clayton et al., 2019; Tully et al., 2020) (p. 113). The above shows that CIL skills are close to those developed in NML, which makes DL skills more parallel and aligned with CIL and NML than ML and MIL.

Research on these literacies has yielded many insights and possible effects on DL pedagogy, in terms of the best methods to help students develop disinformation competencies, and didactics, in terms of how educators approach teaching DL. The effect of one literacy on the other is inevitable. Hameleers (2022) maintains that there is little empirical research on the effectiveness of ML

interventions as forms of corrective information, but in a study of the effects of NML interventions and fact-checkers in response to political misinformation in the US and Netherlands, Hameleers found that rather than depending on ML interventions alone, a combination of such interventions with support from fact checkers to refute falsehoods is the most effective way to separate the truths from the lies and lower issues in agreement in both countries (p. 123). As for MIL, Frau-Meigs (2022) argues that fact-checking and news literacy have created an effect on the fields of journalism and of MIL. Some of the risks this has caused are: MIL is reduced to news literacy, digital journalism is reduced to fact-checking, and the disinformation discourse is minimizing the emphasis on information (p. 912).

Co-Literacy Taxonomy

The active or productive elements of MIL can also be seen in CMPL wherein critical media analysis is connected to actively producing content to counter dominant or dominating media messaging. For example, the production of content for social and political intervention is emphasized in CMPL, while always centering the material conditions of production to ensure that social oppressions embedded in media messages are also actively countered through media work processes (Cordes and Sabzalian, 2020; Hooks, 2014; Nam, 2010; Patterson et al., 2016; Saha, 2013). For example, Cordes and Sabzalian advocate for the production of “anticolonial [media] alternatives” (p. 184) as a core activity in enacting critical media literacies. Nam (2014) articulates CMPL as a praxis “of cultural politics” leading students towards media-making for “collective social action, democracy, symbolic imagination and struggle” (p. 16). CMPL is also conceived as a site of emancipatory or revisionist activism through better understanding of how media cultures also reproduce inequities through media work processes. In advocating for multicultural critical media production literacies, Saha (2013) advocates for challenging “standardized processes” that are based on “neoliberal

economic models in the cultural industries" (p. 229) as a means to realize more racially-just media representations. These examples evidence that CMPL highlights concepts such as relationality, citizenship and justice by practicing literacies through reading media, producing media, and reviewing conditions of labour of media work. Thus, this literacy is about opening up democratic possibility through critical thought and action, and aligns with the active citizenship mission of DL.

Al-Musalli (2022) argues that DL competencies and the process of debunking any given disinformation case requires the knowledge levels described for all four literacies, ML, MIL, CIL, and NML, not merely the former two; therefore, DL needs its own space in the curricula, not limited to themes covered within ML and MIL courses across a few classes. Some of the main macro-skills included in DL, without mapping out the sub-skills they entail, are: a) access to credible resources, fact-checking tools, software, and original sources to validate information, b) analysis of content and discourse, c) evaluation of sources, credibility, authenticity and agendas, d) application of appropriate methods to study disinformation cases, and e) creation of connections or content to educate other users about the debunked cases. DL is closer to CIL and NML than ML or MIL as the journalistic skills, students' interest, and the political and social angles involved in DL, combined with the goal of active involvement in the fight against fake news, gives DL an added layer of citizen responsibility and ownership.

Our taxonomy of literacies (see the Literacy Comparison Table below) lists the macro and micro skills underneath each literacy based on the literature. We presented this taxonomy in a workshop at (GMES, 2023) to elicit our attendees' views on how the macro and micro competencies (skills and subskills) in CMPL and DL connect or interlink with other co-literacies. With the taxonomy, we presented Bloom et al.'s (1956) revised Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain and an outcomes and objectives formulae on page two of their handout to support any attempt by the audience to create

course objectives examples while they discussed the taxonomy. Attendees were invited to work in groups of 3 to review the table and make connections, corrections, and additions to the skills within each literacy. They were encouraged to add more skills (and/or subskills), focusing more on CMPL and DL than the other literacies. They were encouraged to consider the following questions while they reviewed and added their notes:

1. Where do these literacies overlap?

2. Do we have too many separate literacies, or are these co-literacies which could be easily distinguished by educators?

3. What implication do your connections, corrections, and additions to the table have for the scholarly discipline of critical media literacy and higher education program design?

4. Can critical media production and disinformation literacies exist as independent, co-literacies?

5. What does the future curricula in these contexts look like?

Literacies Comparison Table
Wight and Al-Musalli (2023)

Critical Media Production Literacy (CMPL)	Disinformation Literacy (DL)	Media Literacy (ML)	Media Information Literacy (MIL)	New Media Literacy (NML)	Critical Information Literacy (CIL)
a) producing for the purpose of cultural and political intervention; b) refusing, transforming oppressive conditions of cultural production. (Saha, 2013) c) producing counter-narratives of industry work processes and social orders; d) undertaking relationally responsible media work. Cordes and Sabzalian (2020), Hooks (2014), Nam (2010), and Patterson et al. (2016) e) locating, expressing, and navigating social and political worlds to enhance citizenship, democracy and social justice. Hoechsmann and Poyntz (2012) f) building agency, contesting unjust cultural phenomena, and using media for social action. Nam (2010) g) reading media as social constructions with stereotypes and bias, contextual reception, and as motivated by commercial gain. Kellner and Share (2005)	a) accessing digital (platforms) and data; b) fact-checking and classic media literacy; c) regulating platforms; ; d) establishing deliberate social norms on platforms alongside democratic communication. Culloty and Suiter (2021) e) evaluating biases, agendas and intentions. Brisola and Doyle (2019) f) accessing credible, fact-checking tools and resources to validate information; g) analysing content and discourse; h) applying appropriate methods to investigate disinformation cases; i) creating content to educate other users about the debunked cases. Al-Musalli (2022)	a) accessing, analyzing, and producing information for specific outcomes. Aufderheide's (1993) b) writing and reading critically; c) accessing information; d) analysing information; e) evaluating information; f) creating information; g) acting on what is consumed. National Association of Media Literacy Education (n.d.) h) remembering information; i) understanding content; j) applying knowledge; k) analysing content; l) evaluating content; m) creating content. Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revision of Bloom et al.'s (1956) Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain	a) authenticating information; b) engaging with media to promote positive dialogue and access to information. UNESCO (n.d.) c) analysing visual communication; d) reading, writing, and speaking about issues within media. Ruben (1997) e) tackling the effects of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation. Dame Adjin-Tettey (2022) f) recognizing the main role of information and freedom of expression; g) understanding the functions of information providers; h) evaluating content critically to make informed decisions to mitigate the dangers of disinformation; i) creating a political view; j) cooperating to create knowledge and fight injustice. Brisola and Doyle (2019) and UNESCO (n.d.)	a) assessing truthfulness of information online; b) understanding political information production, consumption, and differences in interpretation based on biases and beliefs. Kahne et al. (2012) c) analysing critically the negative impact of deceptive information. Clayton et al. (2019) and Tully et al. (2020)	a) creating a political stance and consciousness based on content; b) engaging with different information contexts, such as political, economic, and cultural; e) managing complex facts to identify biases to resist disinformation; f) cooperating in the collective construction of knowledge to fight injustice when applicable. Brisola and Doyle (2019) and UNESCO (n.d.)

The feedback on the table presented us with more questions than answers. The most prominent conclusion was that the audience saw all the literacies belonging to or fitting under the umbrella of ML. This constituted a challenge for us because we were trying to move away from that analogy and connection to develop lateral rather than vertical connections among the literacies and study them further. As stated above, while we were developing the taxonomy, we believed that it would be easier and more fruitful to initially consider the literacies as mutually exclusive. This way, each was mapped out completely and independently under a column in the taxonomy. On one hand, they appeared distinct enough for us to categorize them, and on the other hand, they appeared connected enough to fit under one table. We did not dismiss the possibility that the audience would use an umbrella analogy and fit all the literacies under ML, but we were hoping to showcase the literacies from a new angle, something that could help create more focus on the literacies as being connected rather than dependent. The ML umbrella analogy became the focus of the discussion, which emphasised to us the need to revisit our claim of independence and co-dependence if we present the taxonomy again at another workshop.

Attendees also reported that most literacies are easily identifiable in terms of overlap and connectivity. While they found our approach to mapping out the literacies as co-literacies interesting, they did not agree with our line of thinking that CMPL and DL are independent literacies from ML, MIL, CIL, and NML. What this means in terms of future curricula and how it may look was a question too big to answer in the timeframe we had for the workshop. However, it was evident to us that our attempt to map out and look at literacies in the form of a taxonomy provides much food for thought and a different way to showcase the possibilities of literacy connections. While the attendee’s responses were not quite what we had anticipated, it situated our thinking on a new understanding of how broad ML is and the need for more discussions on the differences and similarities, the connections and intersections, and the dependence and co-dependence between

literacies to help refine these media literacies in service of creating strong courses outcomes and offerings within emerging literacies, especially the ones in question here, CMPL and DL.

Conclusion

We believe that this taxonomy has helped us locate our two courses better among the literacies. We argue that creating separate lists for each literacy to map out the connections in competencies could help improve the course outcomes, content, and pacing of new courses. It could also fill in the gap in our understanding of where the boundaries of each course may lie. We invite readers to consider future curricula in the context of such mapping. We present this taxonomy checklist as a first draft and hope it will inspire educators to check their courses against it and develop the taxonomy further. Co-literacies are easier to work with than we first thought, and we hope this taxonomy triggers more discussions among educators and course designers.

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